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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether routine, everyday communication in parent-child relationships affects relationship satisfaction as well as how conflict might fit into the relational picture. Fifty-two mothers (38 married and 14 single) with sons 5-14 years of age completed the Iowa Communication Record (ICR) to provide information about routine behaviors and conversations, filling out one ICR per day for 5 days. Subjects also completed the Iowa Routine Inventory Survey at the end of the 5 days. Results showed that relationship satisfaction was highly and positively correlated with both quality of everyday talk and conflict. However, for subjects with high quality communication, the correlation between conflict and relational satisfaction was not significant. Further, there was no significant correlation between any of the measures of quantity of interactions and relational satisfaction. Findings suggest that the quality of routine interaction, especially the quality of talk, is a significant factor in relational satisfaction and that this is important for children's development during the elementary school years. These findings raise questions about the nature and effects of conflict within parent-child relationships. (Eighteen references are attached.) (Author/SR)

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Mothers and their sons: Everyday communication as an indicator and correlate of relationship satisfaction

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Running head: Everyday communication

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Abstract

This study presents everyday, routine communication as a key element in parent-child relationships. To test this notion, the Iowa Communication Record (ICR) and the Iowa Routine Inventory Survey (IRIS) are used to gain information from mothers with elementary aged sons about routine behaviors and conversations. These survey instruments include scales of the quality of communication in everyday conversations, the conflict occurring in the relationships and relationship satisfaction and also obtain information about routine interactions between mothers and their sons. The results show relationship satisfaction highly and positively correlated with both quality of everyday talk and conflict. However, for subjects with high quality communication, the correlation betwen conflict and relational satisfaction is not significant. Also, there is no significant correlation between any of the measures of quantity of interactions and relational satisfaction. This indicates that the quality of routine interaction, especially the quality of talk, is a significant factor in relational satisfaction. It also raises questions about the nature and effects of conflict within parent-child relationships.

MOTHERS AND THEIR SONS: EVERYDAY COMMUNICATION AS AN INDICATOR AND CORRELATE OF RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

The Importance of Communication to Relationships

It is a widespread belief that communication occurring in the context of a relationship affects that relationship. For instance, Marston, Hecht and Roberts (1987) in their discussion of romantic relationships state that "communication is the fundamental action which both expresses and determines the subjective experience of romantic love" (p. 392). Montgomery (1988) in her discussion of quality communication in personal relationships believes that "good communication is deemed to be that which is positively related to the happiness and satisfaction that partners experience in their relationship" (p. 344). Duck and Pond (1989) go even further. They believe that talk and the characteristics of a relationship cannot be split apart, there is a type of synecdochical relationship between the two wherein one contains the other and is contained by the other. According to these two, "not only do relationship definitions . . . affect or influence talk, but also talk defines the relationship, . . ." (p 26). Therefore, if we are interested in relationships, we must look at the communication occurring within these relationships. This is especially true in the case of

parent-child relationships. The communication occuring in this dyad has possible consequences for the child, the parent and for the relationship between the two.

Importance of Communication to Parent-Child Relationships

We know that parent-child relationships are very important to the development of children. For instance, Lytton found that positive climate and cognitive stimulation are conducive to language development (1980). And, Battle (1982) tells us that the mother is the major force which determines if a child views himself/herself positively or negatively.

More importantly, for those of us in communication, we know that parent-child communication can have very positive or very negative effects on children. LaCoste et. al. (1987) feel that faulty parent-child communication can lead to "underachievement, dropping out of school, low self-esteem, psychological withdrawal, drug abuse, suicide and schizophrenia" (p. 116). They also go on to state that

> "the better the perceived communication between an adolescent and his parents the higher the family cohesion, members' self-sufficiency, expressiveness, interest in political and intellectual activities, interest in social and play activities, concern for ethical and spiritual issues and interest in family planning" (p. 117).

Parent-child communication is obviously very important to the child.

The effect/influence of parent-child communication on a child's development is especially pertinent when we consider that childhood is when we begin to define ourselves and communication is "the only way we learn who we are" (Adler & Rodman, 1988, p. 8). This defining process varies with age. For instance, younger children are much more dependent on their parents for communication about their world and themselves, as well as for the provision of the close relationship with another human being that they need. Older children become progressively more dependent on others, especially their peers. The age when this transition begins varies with each individual child and situation. However, a study from the child development literature by Buhrmester and Furman (1987) showed that parents, especially mothers, are important providers of intimacy for children in the second grade. Furthermore, the significance of parents as companions was important to children, not only in second grade but up through the fifth grade. Thus, the elementary years are a time in the child's development when parents would normally be companions as well as the most frequent providers of intimacy. This finding led me to choose the elementary age grouping as a time when the child is very dependent on his relationship with his parent(s), thus making parent-child communication that much more salient.

The Importance of Everyday Communication to Parent-Child Relationships

Not only is communication in general, important, but routine, mundane (and possibly habitual) interaction between two individuals is consequential. Several communication researchers have recognized the need to look at daily interaction (Duck & Rutt, 1988; Duck, 1986; Wheeler, Reis & Nezlek, 1983). Fitzpatrick & Badzinski (1985) called for "an examination of pattern and sequence in family interaction" (p. 724). Likewise, psychologists studying the aftermath of divorce have called for "more research . . . toward the identification and facilitation of patterns of family functioning" (Hetherington, 1979, p. 857) and studies of interaction (Phelps & Slater, 1985).

Indeed, Duck (1990) makes a compelling case for studying relationships via the everyday talk that occurs between relational partners. He states that "relational events are perceived not in a direct way but in mediated ways, through memory, recall, dialog and conversation. Everyday conversation is our window on these processes as they affect real-life relationships" (p. 24). He further views a relationship as "essentially unfinished business that needs to be perpetuated through regular mundane relational communication" (Duck et. al., in press, p. 7). This is especially true in the parent-child relationship. The nature of this relationship, its length and constancy,

is such that it has a daily impact on the lives of the interactants, especially the children.

When a child has been told on a daily basis that he/she is an intelligent, loved and worthwhile human being over a period of several years this helps build a positive self-image as well as positive and stable feelings about the parent-child relationship. This build-up of positive valence through communication acts as a buffer for the child. Thus, a major conflict when the parent gets mad and yells (excepting abusive cases) while hurting at the time, will have a negligible effect on the child's self-esteem or outlook on life. Of course, this can work negatively as well. I liken that process to the famed Chinese water torture: constant little drips of irritation can be much worse than one big gush, after which we can dry off and get on with things. Either way it is the little, constant ups or downs in our lives that can have the stronger impact in the long run and necessitate our study of daily interactions and routine communicative behaviors.

Given this emphasis, it is interesting to note that I found very few studies which looked at the quality of talk between a parent and his/her child. Some looked at the frequency and direction of talk (Wilson et.al., 1990) or at the frequency and type of control (one-up, one-down, or one-across) messages delivered during an interaction (Hatfield,

1990; Phelps & Slater, 1985). I found none which explored the quality of the daily talk between the parent-child dyad.

HYPOTHESES

The lack of studies concerned with the quality of everyday talk led me to conduct a study designed to take a preliminary look at whether or not communication affects relationship satisfaction as well as how conflict might fit into the relational picture. Therefore, I formed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis One: Relationship satisfaction will be positively and significantly correlated with the quality of communication within the relationship.

This hypothesis tests the primary notion that relationships and everyday talk are interconnected. If such interdependence exists, then relationships exhibiting higher quality communication should also exhibit higher satisfaction with their relationship.

Hypothesis Two: Given high quality communication, conflict will not be associated with relational satisfaction.

If quality communication builds positive valence in the way described, then conflict should not be as strongly associated with satisfaction with the relationship as it is when communication is of a poorer quality.

Hypothesis Three: It will be the quality, rather than the quantity, of interactions which determines relational satisfaction.

This building of positive valence to act as a buffer for interactions and occurrences of negative valence requires quality interactions not just interactions. Therefore, those measurements of sheer amount of time spent together will not affect relational satisfaction as consistently as those measurements of quality of interactions. This goes along with the popular notion of "quality time."

METHODS

Subjects

The subjects for this study were recruited in a number of ways. First letters were sent home with elementary boys in a two small towns, one in Iowa and one in Missouri, as well as circulated to the departments at a large midwestern university.

Subjects recruited consisted of 38 married mothers and 14 single mothers. The duration of their present marital status ranged from .5 to 31 years with an average of 12 years (SD=6.4). They ranged from 25 - 49 years of age with a mean of 36 (SD=4.8), their sons ranged from 5 to 14 with a mean of 8.9 (SD=1.9) years. The number of children living with them ranged from 1 to 8 with an average of 2.6 (SD=1.4). Most had undergraduate degrees and worked between

20 and 30 hours a week outside the home. The mean family income was around $25,000.

Instruments

The first instrument used was the Iowa Communication Record (ICR). This is a survey designed to discover what people talk about and how they feel about their interactions. It has been proven a reliable instrument for this purpose, achieving Cronbach alphas in the low to middle .90's (Duck & Rutt, 1988; Duck, Rutt, Hurst & Strejc, in preparation) and achieved an alpha of .83 for this sample. Besides having established reliability, it is ideally suited for the purpose at hand because of its combination of questions about what happened (e.g., time of interaction, length of interaction, topics discussed, activities before, during and after the conversation) and about how the subject felt about the conversation and its effect on the relationship (e.g., the role of talk, the extent to which the subject thought the talk was interesting, and how valuable the conversation was). These types of questions, combined with ten specific measures of the quality of the communication, provide the data necessary for this study. The ten items measuring quality of communication are comprised of nine point Likert scales measuring the following attributes of each reported conversation: relaxed/strained, impersonal/personal, attentive/poor listening, formal/informal, indepth/superficial,

smooth/difficult, guarded/open, great deal of understanding/great deal of misunderstanding, free of communication breakdowns/laden with communication breakdowns, free of conflict/laden with conflict.

The second instrument, the Iowa Routine Interaction Survey (IRIS), was designed specifically to discover the routine interactional patterns between a parent and his/her child. This survey contains five sections mixing closed and open questions with semantic differential scales. The five sections are designed to gain information about (1) demographic characteristics, (2) subjects' satisfaction with relationships in general, (3) the everyday interaction between the mothers and their sons (it asks for a listing of usual routines, activities and "quality time" activities), (4) the amounts, duration and intensity of conflict in the relationship, and (5) the subject's view of the relationship she has with her son (cost/reward ratio, general satisfaction). Relational satisfaction on this survey is measured by a nine point likert scale.

Three of the questions on conflict were combined to form a conflict rating. This scale achieved a Cronbach's Alpha of .91 for this sample. The three items on the scale were number of recurring topics of conflict (range 0-6; mean=2.1; SD=1.21), frequency of conflict (range 1-15/week; average=4-6; SD=3) and intensity of conflict (range 1-7; mean=3.9; SD=1.7). One other area of conflict, the duration

of most arguments, did not correlate significantly with the other items included in the scale and was, therefore, dropped from subsequent analyses.

Procedure

The subjects were asked to fill out one ICR per day for five days pertaining to one conversation they had with their sons between 3:30 p.m. and bedtime for the son. I chose this particular time frame for pragmatic reasons: this is when the two of them are most likely to be together and have time for conversation (mornings are generally too hectic) and, when the kids are in bed, the mother is more likely to have time to fill out the ICR with little elapsed time since the interaction.

The subjects were also asked to complete the IRIS at the end of the five days of recording conversations. This survey was completed at the end of the week to offset the influence of demand characteristics on the reported conversations using the ICR.

RESULTS

The primary question of interest was to look at the quality of everyday communication as measured by the ten item scale on the ICR in relation to the amount of satisfaction that the mother reports having in the relationship. In order to do this, I took the mean of the reported quality of communication across the conversations within each subject and correlated this with the reported

level of satisfaction. This correlation (r=.36) was significant at the .009 level of probability.

Hypothesis Two dealt with how conflict might affect relationship satisfaction. Somewhat surprisingly, the conflict scale correlated positively with relationship satisfaction. The correlation (r=.40) was significant at the .006 level of probability. This positive correlation indicates that mothers who scored higher on the conflict scale (reporting more recurring topics of conflict, higher frequency and/or more intense arguments) also reported more relational satisfaction.

A median split was done on subjects' scores on the quality of communication scale to create subsamples of "high quality communication" subjects and "low quality communication" subjects with twenty-six subjects in each group. Correlations between relational satisfaction and conflict for each group were then conducted. As Hypothesis Two predicted, the correlation between these two variables disappeared when subjects reported high quality communication ($r=.32$; $p<.114$). For subjects in the low quality communication group, however, there was still a significant correlation ($r=.46$; $p<.038$).

Furthermore, a regression model which used quality of communication and conflict as predictors of relational satisfaction showed that these two variables accounted for about 20% of the variance in relational satisfaction. An

ANOVA on the regression model indicates significance at the .007 level (F = 5.587).

Hypothesis Three posited that it would be the quality of the interaction as opposed to quantity which would be correlated with relational satisfaction. Every measure of quantity: reported usual time together during a day (which was significantly and negatively correlated with hours of employment outside of the home: $r = -.376$; $p<.009$); conversation length; number of routine activites the mother does with the son and the number of special activities done with the son that month, failed to correlate significantly with relational satisfaction.

DISCUSSION

It would seem that the quality of everyday, routine communication is, as posited by Duck and others, significantly correlated with relational satisfaction in mother-son relationships. Since these data are correlational in nature, we can draw no conclusions about whether quality communication is the cause of satisfaction or whether satisfication with a relationship causes quality communication. A third explanation, that I tend to favor, is that communication and relationships are interdependent with each other. If so, quality communication might build positive valence in the relationship which leads to higher satisfaction which leads to quality communication, ad infinitum. One thing seems certain, there is some

connection between the quality of communication and the satisfaction that these mothers reported in their relationships with their sons.

According to these data, this connection is not built by simply being around each other and interacting, the quality of those interactions seems to have more impact on the relationship. The finding that time together, conversation length, number of routine activities and number of special activities do not affect relationship satisfaction (as reported by the mother) supports this and seems consistent with the popular notion of "quality time." Of course, there are extremes where this would not hold true. If a parent spent very little time with the child (no matter how high quality those interactions were), it could prove quite difficult to be satisfied with the relationship or to have quality communication, for that matter. Some minimal amount of interaction would be necessary to build the positive valence. But, under normal circumstances, it appears to be more the quality of the interaction's talk than simply the number of interactions which influences relational satisfaction.

Exactly what this influence might be or exactly what processes might underlie the connection between quality of communication and relational satisfaction is unclear at this point. The hypothesis that high quality communication mediates the effects of conflict seems to be upheld by this

data. What is not upheld is the implied negative effects of conflict assumed in the rationale for this study. It was somewhat surprising to find that conflict seems, according to this data, to add to relational satisfaction. Again, due to the correlational nature of the data, these results must be interpreted with caution. However, they lead to speculation about the type of mother-son relationship in which such conflict occurs. Possibly, the ability to air grievances and bring things out in the open, as many marriage psychologists advocate, is beneficial to the mother-son relationship as well. This seems contrary to the common view of the parent wielding authority over his/her children. However, this type of long term relationship may involve more adjustment and adaptation than other types of relationships where conflict is considered as negative. Given the amount of adapting to each other that the participants need to do, especially as children develop and mature, a certain amount of conflict may be a sign of relational growth and adjustment. Such conflicts may be the "growing pains" of the child, the parent (growing as a parent) and the relationship itself.

All in all, it would seem that, while conflict certainly plays an important role in relationship satisfaction, quality, everyday communication is also an important component of this complex and influential association. At this point, we do not know exactly how

conflict, communication and relationship satisfaction might interact to influence each other or what other variables might come into play. Certainly, given the importance of this particular relationship to millions of lives, the inquiry into such questions seems worthy of our attention.

Limitations

This study suffers from the same problems which attend many such studies of parent-child relationships. One of these being that there is no data gathered from the child. All data is self-report (which holds its own inherent problems) from the mothers only. Certainly, future studies should attempt to gain data from the sons as well although, given the age range of these subjects, that will be difficult.

Of course, the small number of subjects used in the study limits the generalizability of the results as does the newness of the IRIS instrument. The IRIS scale needs to be refined and validated with other samples of parents to provide more confidence in the data it generates.

Even given these limitations, however, the study represents some solid trends indicating an important link between quality communication and relationships. This is a link which emphasizes the importance of the quality of everyday talk occuring in relationships. At the very least, it should spur communication researchers interested in parent-child relationships to look at the quality of

everyday talk as well as conflict, frequency of interaction and perceptions about the relationship.

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